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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the history and effect of popular culture generally and of the adolescent formula novel specifically. Seven primary characteristics of art as popular culture are that the work is accessible, easy to understand, conventional in form, not shocking in content, expressive of common and appropriate values, relative to some element of immediate concern, and of a distinctive, recognizable shape. The formula for adolescent novels includes the following characteristics: (1) after the protagonist is introduced, the problem is dramatized by a brief episode; (2) some event destroys the precarious equilibrium of the protagonist and precipitates a crisis; (3) the protagonist reacts with increasing frustration and does not approach the solution to the problem; (4) just as a point of hopelessness seems to have been reached, an accident or the sudden intervention of a transcendent character brings illumination and insight to the protagonist; and (5) the problem is solved by the protagonist and appropriate action is taken. A brief synopsis and possible teaching approach are outlined for each of three adolescent formula novels: "Watership Down," "A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich," and "The Chocolate War." (TS)

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ADOLESCENT FORMULA LITERATURE

AND ITS PROMISCUOUS PROGENY

Lou Willett Stanek

Not so long ago this would have been an underground meeting, perhaps complete with a password and hooded cape for the participants. Because, "really dahling," what English teacher with a grain of professionalism could take teen-age books seriously. That attitude has changed dramatically in the past few years, evidenced by the number of slots given to adolescent literature on this convention program, the formation of ALAN and your presence here this afternoon. But a general elitist attitude toward education, and particularly in English, has been a long, lingering and damaging illness. Shock treatment in the sixties helped, but "cured" is not yet the latest diagnosis.

Today I would like to amble down memory lane a bit looking back at the heritage of this genre - deeply seeded in formula literature - and then at some of the promiscuous progeny which scarcely resemble the family line. I will consider this literature as popular culture, not in a condescending way, but in view of an analytical approach teachers might use to build young adult novels into their curricula. I will look specifically at three books, Watership Down, A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich and The Chocolate War, atypical to the formula, but very typical of popular culture in the seventies.

CS 201 865

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The junior novel like jazz is an American creation. In the thirties when a larger percentage of students of all abilities began to remain in school for a longer time, teachers needed books that the less able could read. At the same time the adult novel was becoming franker about the human condition, and many felt these books were no longer appropriate for the young. A novel written especially for adolescents seemed to be a perfect solution. From the beginning kids loved them, but educators were horrified when this new genre began to exhibit characteristics of formula literature - what Barbara Martinec has labeled the bastard offspring of popular culture.[1]

Consequently, for 25 to 30 years we treated literature for young adults and their reading of these books in the same way we did their parking on thrill hill. We put the books on the shelves just as we provided cars with full tanks of gas, but the issue was not often discussed in polite society.

T. S. Eliot suggested years ago that "it is just the literature we read for amusement or purely for pleasure that may have the greatest ... least suspected ... earliest and most insidious influences upon us. Hence it is that the influence of popular novelists, popular plays of contemporary life, require to be scrutinized." But it is only recently that serious scholars have begun to study popular culture, and to make inferences about groups by putting together their cultural products.

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1. Barbara Martinec, "Popular But Not Just a Part of the Crowd," English Journal, March 1971, p. 339.

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Adolescent literature, for the most part, is popular culture. This, of course, defines it in social terms rather than aesthetic - the young are a subculture. The literature written especially for them crosses class lines - which is an aspect of popular culture. For example, polo is a class sport. Old English or the poetry of Ezra Pound is class literature; the adolescent novel is popular literature.

So as teachers you can rightfully ask, then why study it - especially those which adhere to the formula; they certainly are not the masterpieces of the human spirit. As Eliot suggested:

1. More time is spent on the culture of Everyman than on great art.
2. Immense amounts of creative energy are spent on it.
3. If ignored, we get a distorted sense of history. Hawthorne and Melville were not the popular writers of the 19th century. If the 20th century is judged only by Joyce, John Barth, Brecht or Virginia Wolf or Faulkner - that too will be a distorted picture.

Literature enjoyed by the many tells us much about our society and our age. Let us look at the primary characteristics; to be categorized as popular culture, art must be:

1. Accessible.
2. Easy to understand or it will not be enjoyed.

3. Conventional - it cannot be too unique in form or readers will not be able to handle it.
4. It must not be too shocking or disturbing or it will interfere with the escape and amusement.
5. It must express common or appropriate values - a character can explore all of the alternative life styles but must find in the last chapter that he is sorry he strayed - i.e., Valley of the Dolls, Fanny Hill or The Peter Pan Bag, Go Ask Alice and Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones.
6. It must relate to some element of immediate concern - these books for the most part become outmoded very quickly. For example, who is reading I'm Really Dragged Out But Nothing Get Me Down now that the draft is not compulsory. Perhaps kids still read Fifteen and Seventeenth Summer because how to get a boy friend and build a relationship with a boy are always immediate concerns.
7. Finally popular culture. It must have a recognizable shape: different types take basic story forms. For example, the classical detective, probably the VIP of popular culture, presents a world that is ordered; the crime is abnormal. The crime involves only one person or aspect of the society, and the detective always solves the case restoring that order. There is even an order in

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which each element will happen. The reader knows what the story will do for him; it is also a predictable market for a publisher; easily imitated, people without training learn how to react to the basic pattern. Psychologically, it represents fantasy, dreams, or wish fulfillment - a search for gratification we do not get in our real lives. It helps to resolve conflicts we have not been able to work out. Formulas help to reaffirm what people believe ought to happen even though life does not always hold up to the test. Criminals are brought to justice and right and wrong are absolute certainties.

Cawelti, a colleague at the University of Chicago, has suggested that formula literature is important because it represents a synthesis of several important cultural functions which in our age have been taken over by the popular arts:

1. Cultural ritual - articulating and reaffirming the primary cultural values which religion once did
2. The game dimension or entertainment - rules known to all as in a football game provides excitement, release and suspense
3. Ego enhancement - temporary resolution of inescapable frustrations and tensions. ~~through frustration~~.[2]

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2 - John Cawelti, "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature," Journal of Popular Culture, Volume III: No. 3.

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Barbara Martinec has isolated the formula for adolescent literature and suggests that the formula itself is an essential aesthetic element that teachers can use as a tool for evaluating and analyzing young adult books. She selected six popular and prolific writers: Cavanna, Emery, Felson, Stoltz, Summers and Tunis. At the time of her study she found that of the four characteristic elements of a formula - type of situation, pattern of action character rules and relationships and setting - type of situation had changed most over the years. It had changed from the typical "how to get a date for the prom" to how to deal with alcoholic parents in Jennifer, drug addiction in Tuned Out, A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich, etc., and dozens of premarital pregnancy plots such as Too Bad About That Haines Girl, Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones, and of mothers who chose not to marry as in Mom the Wolfman and Me. Even this theme has grown bolder - moving from marriage always being a solution to considering abortion - disastrously in Zindel's My Darling My Hamburger and more rationally in Norma Klein's It's Not What You Think.

* * *

Martinec has outlined the adolescent novel formula as follows:

1. After the introduction of the protagonist, the problem is dramatized by a brief episode, and then explicitly stated by an intrusion of the omniscient author.

2. Although the protagonist has managed to function adequately up to a point, now some event destroys the precarious equilibrium and precipitates a crisis.
3. The protagonist reacts with increasing frustration, refusing to heed the advice of wiser characters and, instead of approaching the solution of the problem, seemingly getting further and further away from it.
4. Just as a point of absolute hopelessness seems to have been reached, an accident, coincidence, or the sudden intervention of a "transcendent" character brings illumination and insight to the beleaguered protagonist.
5. The problem is solved by the protagonist and appropriate action is taken.

There are still many formula books being written, and my guess is that kids still enjoy them because they, temporarily at least, meet psychological needs the young have at this time. But currently those novels which do not adhere to the old rules probably outweigh those that do. As I have suggested, the formula in literature is not only a critical tool, it is also a barometer of the times. When that form begins to change, it reveals a great deal about the reader and about those adults responsible for meeting reader needs. In the sixties, a lot of barriers were being torn down in our society, one of them was the taboos in subject matter for teenage books - drugs, alcohol,

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pregnancy, homosexuality, divorce became subjects for exploration rather than being locked in the closet. Main characters were not just nice middle-class white kids; but blacks, Indians, the poor and antiheroes became protagonists.

These changes, of course, created other problems for the formula. How could a novel end happily and a proper solution be found for books such as Isabell Holland's Man Without a Face, which deals with homosexuality; or Go Ask Alice, based on the diary of an actual girl who died from drugs; or Richard Peck's Moonlight Lake, probing the guilt of two boys who feel responsible for the death of a schoolmate; or Brian Woolley's Some Sweet Day, the story of a father who kills his 2-year-old son?

Since there is a trend away from the traditional teen-age book, I have chosen three currently popular young adult books which do not fit the mold and will suggest some approaches for using them in your curriculum.

It takes a strong ego to be a teacher because if you are successful your student will briefly stop with you, take what you have and go on - hopefully not needing you any more. With every reading experience you should give him a tool to take with him, a tool to be used for digging into the next book, until he has a bagful of tools and he does not need assistance anymore. The following are some tools I suggest for Watership Down, A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich and The Chocolate War.

Watership Down by Richard Adams, the unusual adventurous story of a group of freedom fighting rabbits forced out of their home when a housing project is to be built in their field, breaks all of the rules for teen-age fiction. It is too long and it is not even about kids. When I was approached to write a teacher's guide for a 426-page book about rabbits, my first impulse was to duck that one. However, when I was a high school English teacher one of my students gave me insight into presenting literature to kids that has become my golden rule; it seldom fails. He said, "Until I can find me in Hamlet I'm not going to like it and probably not read it." So the trick was to offer suggestions that moved the students in and out of their own experience while sharing Mr. Adams. After a long chat with Richard Adams the task seemed easier. This Oxford trained civil servant told me that his was a modern day Lewis Carroll story. Watership Down began as a story he concocted to entertain his daughters on a long car ride. They had liked it so much he eventually wrote it down. So, in spite of the length, his intended audience really had been the young. Secondly, he said that he was flattered reviewers had been able to see so many levels, but what he had really intended were simply three: (1) a cliff-hanger about rabbits (so I made a mental note to look carefully at structure); (2) it was a hymn of praise to the English countryside (that said - language; images to me); and (3) it was a tribute to a man who was a proper leader - Mr. Adams' commanding officer during the war (learning their roles as leaders

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or followers is certainly part of the adolescent self-discovery period, I thought). So I had a 3-pronged starting point that, with a little luck, would guide young readers to an active confrontation with the novel, making them as aware of their own viewpoint as Adams'.

I have excerpted a few examples of those three points to share with you. If you feel that any of the discussion questions or activities might work with your students - steal them.

1. Fiver is the prophet, the rabbit with vision, but physically he is not impressive and he will never be asked to join the Owsala, the crack military corps of the warren. You might ask students: What is it about Fiver that makes many of the rabbits reluctant to listen to him - this takes them into plot and character development and asks them to make inferences; followed by: In your school what students' opinions are most trusted? Why? Do students in your school make judgments for any of the same reasons these rabbits do? What does this tell you about the values in your society? Is there anything equivalent to the Owsala in your school? What are the requirements for membership? What kind of rabbits were included in their elite group - the Owsala? This line of questioning weaves as a loom in and out of the fictional and personal experience, binding the thrusts of imagination on to a web of reality which is the definition of an expanded consciousness.

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2. Chapter 6 is a frame story, or a story within a story, a device used repeatedly by Adams. The general story about the rabbits who leave their warren is the frame. Dandelion's story about the Blessing of El-ahrairah is the story within the story or the frame story. Students could be asked to compare the frame story to the legend of Adam and Eve in Genesis. El-ahrairah is a mythical hero - stories about him attempt to explain the meaning of life and to chronicle adventures. Is there an El-ahrairah in your school? your family? (In school it can be an outstanding athlete or leader; in a family an adventuresome, successful or funny member. How does someone become an El-ahrairah? What purpose do they serve in a group? This tack, of course, spotlights structure and allusion, but hopefully understanding these concepts can be adapted to the student's understanding of his own life and family history.

3. As a final activity I suggest that students be asked to pretend their English class must undertake a very difficult mission. There must be danger involved. On one that they know outside of the class will help. Write a brief account of who will be your leaders, explaining why they are chosen. Explain what your role will be. What strengths, what weaknesses would you bring to the mission? Try to predict if it will be a successful mission. Reading the novel should have sharpened their thinking about leaders and the responsibility of leadership. However, if it is left at an abstract level, it will not have the impact of having to apply the concepts to

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themselves and their friends. If you feel this would be embarrassing or threatening if shared, give them the option of turning it in without receiving peer reaction, or allow them to choose a small group of students to share with - you will know your class and how much trust and support exist among its members.

From the pastoral setting of a farm in the English countryside, we switch to a New York City ghetto. A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich is the story of Benjie Johnson, 13, black and well on his way to being hooked for good on heroin; and it receives my vote for one of the best young adult books I know.

Surely one of the tools most important for digging into a novel is awareness of voice, becoming friends, if you will, with the person telling the story. A reader must learn to know if the narrator can be trusted, what is influencing him, why he is telling the story. Try to imagine what you would have missed in The Great Gatsby if you had not come to understand Nick or Huckleberry Finn if Huck's naivete had eluded you or if you had assumed all of Poe's narrators were sane.

Alice Childress is an actress as well as a writer and she is very atune to voice. Her story has 10 narrators, each of them gives you a piece of Benjie's story - and of course his story is affected by their perspectives. I suggest warm-up exercises for this one. Confucius said, "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand." I agree and therefore

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would suggest three writing assignments before the students read Hero. The purpose would be for the student to experience how audience and subject influence the thoughts and language of the storyteller. These assignments would work down the spectrum of conversation from two people talking to each other, to a dramatic monologue where one person dominates the person he is speaking to and finally to an interior monologue - stripped down to one voice - someone talking to himself about himself.

Having experimented with change of viewpoint in their own writing students should have a better understanding of the concept - that form embodies intent in literature - and should be able to discuss why Alice Childress chooses 10 narrators and how it would have been different if she had told it in third person from her own viewpoint. You then might ask them to choose one character to tell the story and to defend the choice. Finally, how would the story have been different if the author had written it as a play having 10 characters talk to each other rather than the solo speeches?

Although this is Benjie's story, it is also about an entire family - a grandmother and Benjie's mother and her common-law husband, Butler Craig. Childress explores openly, honestly and with sensitivity what it is like to be old, children's resentment of parents' love for each other - and the difficulties families have in dealing with these issues. I suggest the art as a mirror of reality approach for this aspect of the book. For example: Butler and Benjie's mother are in love. Did you find this

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appealing? Comical? Embarrassing? Benjie resented their feelings and felt left out. Have you ever felt that way about your parents' relationship? Benjie's grandmother says, "Being old is strange to me cause I'm not yet used to it." What is it she cannot get used to? What is the conflict between her and her daughter, Rose? Why is it difficult for three generations to live together? Does it have anything to do with power? In this family, who has the power, or the control?

Finally, it would be a loss for readers not to pay special attention to the use of language. Alice Childress has had much experience on the stage, and she has a good ear for dialogue that is sometimes funny and most times character revealing. I would suggest selecting examples where she has used the language in a clever, humorous or unusual way and asking the students to describe what she has done and what effect it has created. For example, she might use unusual comparisons of things or exaggerate for humorous effect or use one of the parts of speech incorrectly, but effectively. Selections you might use are:

1. A hero ain't nothing but a sandwich.
2. I don't feel sorry for a livin!
3. His face look like a stompin ground for sadness.
4. They have let this hustler's harvest pass.
5. The evening drank itself to an end.

This exercise, of course, not only will increase a student's appreciation for Childress' style, but aid in linguistic skill development.

Neither Watership Down nor A Hero are typical teen-age novels, but Robert Cromier's The Chocolate War is the real maverick. Superfically, it appears to be in the tradition of Catcher in the Rye and A Separate Peace. The setting is a prep school, the main characters are teen-age boys, there are several incidents about pranks, but Jerry the main character is not as appealing as either Holden or Finney, and Archie his antagonist makes Gene and Stredlater resemble choirboys.

Many teachers will choose not to present The Chocolate War to their students, and if you feel uncomfortable with it, I would respect that decision. Granted it has been bombed from some impressive heights. Personally, I think it is an important book - note I did not say pretty or appealing, but it seems to be Cromier is looking through Shakespeare's, Dostoevski's, Melville's and Conrad's glasses. Because he sees that the young can have a heart of darkness, it does not shock me and I do not think he is distorting reality. Cromier has paid respect to his young readers by presenting the truth as he sees it - straight and strong. The Chocolate War, a book about losing, is not a typical teen-age book; it was not written in typical times. Popular culture reflects the preoccupations of a society. The Chocolate War reflects the preoccupations of a society inundated with the Watergate scandal just as sex, drugs, social and racial tensions

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engrossed us during the late sixties. Adolescent lives were touched by the national disillusionment as were their elders. If none of the books written for the young dealt with this phenomenon, psychologically the omission could convey another cover-up. Adolescents are trying to learn to cope independently. Protecting them from what they must learn to master does not aid in their maturation.

This novel suggests so many possible approaches, that it might be a good opportunity to suggest a number of possibilities and allow the student to set his own goals. The process of not having objectives externally imposed, but being allowed to direct his own learning, should strengthen the student's commitment. Some examples you might offer:

1. Themes - corruption, power, politics, thwarted leadership, the antihero youth as victim
2. Social issues: gangs, education, religion, political corruption, families
3. Comparison to other literature:
   - Adolescent odyssey to maturity (Huck Finn, Great Expectations, A Separate Peace, Catcher in the Rye, Augie March, Native Son or Portrait of an Artist As a Young Man)
   - Youth as a subculture (The Outsiders, Tomboy, Durango Street, West Side Story or The Secret Planet of Junior Brown)

- Impotence in the face of evil (Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock).

4. Modern tragedy: using Arthur Miller's definition of a tragic hero - a man who is willing to sacrifice all to maintain his dignity.

The student could choose to work in a small group, to prepare a presentation for the class, write a paper or do a skit. The teacher's role then is to be a resource in helping the student to achieve his goals.

Watership Down, A Hero and The Chocolate War are only three of the many current adolescent novels that suggest the formula is changing. Perhaps the formula should not change; perhaps young adult literature should remain escape literature - a way station - a super way to fantasize and dream, play a game and be reassured. But it will and is changing - the question is where is it going and what will it tell us about ourselves and our age. The evolution of a literary genre always seems so logical when viewed in retrospect. The piecemeal steps lock neatly into a crescendo. The gifted writers who took an avant-garde tack are heralded for breaking into the new epoch, and the second-rate writers who flirted with deviant styles or topics fall into convenient obscurity. But what of tomorrow in adolescent literature? Were the sixties and seventies simply a watershed before the watergate? Has our government perhaps created the first generation of

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European cynics in American adolescent battalions? Will The Chocolate War be yesterday's cold tea? What fiction, if any, will interest, delight, inspire or shock those human beings invading their teens today? The distinguished authors sharing this lectern may give us some hints. I, for one, am listening carefully. I side for the moment with John Updike who said in a recent interview: "I have more faith than ever in fiction. I really think it's the only way to say a lot of things. To capture the mermaid live, it's the only net we have."

Mermaid Beware!